

CHAPTER XIV. COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE.

"I WENT first to Mannheim, Lady Janet, as I told you I should in my letter, and I heard all that the consul and the hospital doctors could tell me. No new fact of the slightest importance turned up. I got my directions for finding the German surgeon, and I set forth to try what I could make next of the man who performed the operation. On the question of his patient's identity he had (as a perfect stranger to her) nothing to tell me. On the question of her mental condition, however, he made a very important statement. He owned to me that he had operated on another person injured by a shell-wound on the head at the battle of Solferino, and that the patient (recovering also in this case) recovered--mad. That is a remarkable admission; don't you think so?"

Lady Janet's temper had hardly been allowed time enough to subside to its customary level.

"Very remarkable, I dare say," she answered, "to people who feel any doubt of this pitiable lady of yours being mad. I feel no doubt--and, thus far, I find your account of yourself, Julian, tiresome in the extreme. Go on to the end. Did you lay your hand on Mercy Merrick?"

"No."

"Did you hear anything of her?"

"Nothing. Difficulties beset me on every side. The French ambulance had shared in the disasters of France--it was broken up. The wounded Frenchmen were prisoners somewhere in Germany, nobody knew where. The French surgeon had been killed in action. His assistants were scattered--most likely in hiding. I began to despair of making any discovery, when accident threw in my way two Prussian soldiers who had been in the French cottage. They confirmed what the German surgeon told the consul, and what Horace himself told me--namely, that no nurse in a black dress was to be seen in the place. If there had been such a person, she would certainly (the Prussians inform me) have been found in attendance on the injured Frenchmen. The cross of the Geneva Convention would have been amply sufficient to protect her: no woman wearing that badge of honor would have disgraced herself by abandoning the wounded men before the Germans entered the place."

"In short," interposed Lady Janet, "there is no such person as Mercy Merrick."

"I can draw no other conclusion," said Julian, "unless the English doctor's idea is the right one. After hearing what I have just told you, he thinks the woman herself is Mercy Merrick."

Lady Janet held up her hand as a sign that she had an objection to make here.

"You and the doctor seem to have settled everything to your entire satisfaction on both sides," she said. "But there is one difficulty that you have neither of you accounted for yet."

"What is it, aunt?"

"You talk glibly enough, Julian, about this woman's mad assertion that Grace is the missing nurse, and that she is Grace. But you have not explained yet how the idea first got into her head; and, more than that, how it is that she is acquainted with my name and address, and perfectly familiar with Grace's papers and Grace's affairs. These things are a puzzle to a person of my average intelligence. Can your clever friend, the doctor, account for them?"

"Shall I tell you what he said when I saw him this morning?"

"Will it take long?"

"It will take about a minute."

"You agreeably surprise me. Go on."

"You want to know how she gained her knowledge of your name and of Miss Roseberry's affairs," Julian resumed. "The doctor says in one of two ways. Either Miss Roseberry must have spoken of you and of her own affairs while she and the stranger were together in the French cottage, or the stranger must have obtained access privately to Miss Roseberry's papers. Do you agree so far?"

Lady Janet began to feel interested for the first time.

"Perfectly," she said. "I have no doubt Grace rashly talked of matters which an older and wiser person would have kept to herself."

"Very good. Do you also agree that the last idea in the woman's mind when she was struck by the shell might have been (quite probably) the idea of Miss Roseberry's identity and Miss Roseberry's affairs? You think it likely enough? Well, what happens after that? The wounded woman is brought to life by an operation, and she becomes delirious in the hospital at Mannheim. During her delirium the idea of Miss Roseberry's identity ferments in her brain, and assumes its present perverted form. In that form it still remains. As a necessary consequence, she persists in reversing the two identities. She says she is Miss Roseberry, and declares Miss Roseberry to be Mercy Merrick. There is the doctor 's explanation. What do you think of it?"

"Very ingenious, I dare say. The doctor doesn't quite satisfy me, however, for all that. I think--"

What Lady Janet thought was not destined to be expressed. She suddenly checked herself, and held up her hand for the second time.

"Another objection?" inquired Julian.

"Hold your tongue!" cried the old lady. "If you say a word more I shall lose it again."

"Lose what, aunt?"

"What I wanted to say to you ages ago. I have got it back again--it begins with a question. (No more of the doctor--I have had enough of him!) Where is she--your pitiable lady, my crazy wretch--where is she now? Still in London?"

"Yes."

"And still at large?"

"Still with the landlady, at her lodgings."

"Very well. Now answer me this! What is to prevent her from making another attempt to force her way (or steal her way) into my house? How am I to protect Grace, how am I to protect myself, if she comes here again?"

"Is that really what you wished to speak to me about?"

"That, and nothing else."

They were both too deeply interested in the subject of their conversation to look toward the conservatory, and to notice the appearance at that moment of a distant gentleman among the plants and flowers, who had made his way in from the garden outside. Advancing noiselessly on the soft Indian matting, the gentleman ere long revealed himself under the form and features of Horace Holmcroft. Before entering the dining-room he paused, fixing his eyes inquisitively on the back of Lady Janet's visitor--the back being all that he could see in the position he then occupied. After a pause of an instant the visitor spoke, and further uncertainty was at once at an end. Horace, nevertheless, made no movement to enter the room. He had his own jealous distrust of what Julian might be tempted to say at a private interview with his aunt; and he waited a little longer on the chance that his doubts might be verified.

"Neither you nor Miss Roseberry need any protection from the poor deluded creature," Julian went on. "I have gained great influence over her--and I have satisfied her that it is useless to present herself here again."

"I beg your pardon," interposed Horace, speaking from the conservatory door. "You have done nothing of the sort."

(He had heard enough to satisfy him that the talk was not taking the direction which his Suspicions had anticipated. And, as an additional incentive to show himself, a happy chance had now offered him the opportunity of putting Julian in the wrong.)

"Good heavens, Horace!" exclaimed Lady Janet. "Where did you come from? And what do you mean?"

"I heard at the lodge that your ladyship and Grace had returned last night. And I came in at once without troubling the servants, by the shortest way." He turned to Julian next. "The woman you were speaking of just now," he proceeded, "has been here again already--in Lady Janet's absence."

Lady Janet immediately looked at her nephew. Julian reassured her by a gesture.

"Impossible," he said. "There must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake," Horace rejoined. "I am repeating what I have just

heard from the lodge-keeper himself. He hesitated to mention it to Lady Janet for fear of alarming her. Only three days since this person had the audacity to ask him for her ladyship's address at the sea-side. Of course he refused to give it."

"You hear that, Julian?" said Lady Janet.

No signs of anger or mortification escaped Julian. The expression in his face at that moment was an expression of sincere distress.

"Pray don't alarm yourself," he said to his aunt, in his quietest tones. "If she attempts to annoy you or Miss Roseberry again, I have it in my power to stop her instantly."

"How?" asked Lady Janet.

"How, indeed!" echoed Horace. "If we give her in charge to the police, we shall become the subject of a public scandal."

"I have managed to avoid all danger of scandal," Julian answered; the expression of distress in his face becoming more and more marked while he spoke. "Before I called here to-day I had a private consultation with the magistrate of the district, and I have made certain arrangements at the police station close by. On receipt of my card, an experienced man, in plain clothes, will present himself at any address that I indicate, and will take her quietly away. The magistrate will hear the charge in his private room, and will examine the evidence which I can produce, showing that she is not accountable for her actions. The proper medical officer will report officially on the case, and the law will place her under the necessary restraint."

Lady Janet and Horace looked at each other in amazement. Julian was, in their opinion, the last man on earth to take the course--at once sensible and severe--which Julian had actually adopted. Lady Janet insisted on an explanation.

"Why do I hear of this now for the first time?" she asked. "Why did you not tell me you had taken these precautions before?"

Julian answered frankly and sadly.

"Because I hoped, aunt, that there would be no necessity for proceeding to extremities. You now force me to acknowledge that the lawyer and the doctor (both of whom I have seen this morning) think, as you do, that she is

not to be trusted. It was at their suggestion entirely that I went to the magistrate. They put it to me whether the result of my inquiries abroad--unsatisfactory as it may have been in other respects--did not strengthen the conclusion that the poor woman's mind is deranged. I felt compelled in common honesty to admit that it was so. Having owned this, I was bound to take such precautions as the lawyer and the doctor thought necessary. I have done my duty--sorely against my own will. It is weak of me, I dare say; but I can not bear the thought of treating this afflicted creature harshly. Her delusion is so hopeless! her situation is such a pitiable one!"

His voice faltered. He turned away abruptly and took up his hat. Lady Janet followed him, and spoke to him at the door. Horace smiled satirically, and went to warm himself at the fire.

"Are you going away, Julian?"

"I am only going to the lodge-keeper. I want to give him a word of warning in case of his seeing her again."

"You will come back here?" (Lady Janet lowered her voice to a whisper.)

"There is really a reason, Julian, for your not leaving the house now."

"I promise not to go away, aunt, until I have provided for your security. If you, or your adopted daughter, are alarmed by another intrusion, I give you my word of honor my card shall go to the police station, however painfully I may feel it myself." (He, too, lowered his voice at the next words) "In the meantime, remember what I confessed to you while we were alone. For my sake, let me see as little of Miss Roseberry as possible. Shall I find you in this room when I come back?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

He laid a strong emphasis, of look as well as of tone, on that one word. Lady Janet understood what the emphasis meant.

"Are you really," she whispered, "as much in love with Grace as that?"

Julian laid one hand on his aunt's arm, and pointed with the other to Horace--standing with his back to them, warming his feet on the fender.

"Well?" said Lady Janet.

"Well," said Julian, with a smile on his lip and a tear in his eye, "I never envied any man as I envy him!"

With those words he left the room.